



Reading latent values and priorities in TikTok's community guidelines for children

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study analyzes TikTok's Community Guidelines to understand how ByteDance balances competing priorities around protecting children. The analysis reveals that TikTok employs three interconnected strategies: scaffolding rules by age and risk, segmenting content with tailored policies, and siloing features from children. Underlying these are latent values of positivity, proactivity, and precision that serve priorities of appeasing stakeholders, preempting regulation, and fostering a positive public image. By examining how these strategies and values work together, the study contributes a novel analytical framework for understanding the complex dynamics of youth governance on platforms. The findings illustrate how platform policy documents strategically navigate complex tensions governing children's participation.

Keywords

TikTok, children, youth, policy, governance, platform, social media, values, lexical analysis, critical discourse analysis

Introduction

TikTok has more than 1 billion users worldwide (TikTok, 2021), with a notably large portion of users under-18. External data suggests that as much as 32.5% of TikTok's US users are aged between 10–19, compared to 20.5% under 18 for Instagram and

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15% under 15 for YouTube (DataReportal, 2024; Statista, 2024). In the United States alone, TikTok has nearly 50 million under-18 users (Wallaroo, 2023). This significant youth presence raises concerns about the platform's potential impacts on children's privacy, safety, and well-being. The risks and benefits of social media engagement are particularly pronounced for young people and as a result, TikTok's approach to governing its uniquely young user base is of interest to parents, policymakers, and advocacy groups.

TikTok faces intense regulatory pressure and public scrutiny as a Chinese-owned company with a data-intensive operating model. There is significant ongoing geopolitical turmoil for TikTok in both the US, where they face targeted regulation and criticisms (Heath, 2023) and an impending forced divestment or ban (Shepardson, 2024), and in the EU where they are threatened by broader trends in social media regulation (Chan and Casert, 2022). Amid this, TikTok's policies and public communications are strategic tools for asserting responsible governance and assuaging concerns. The platform's Community Guidelines play an especially pivotal role here, functioning as TikTok's most direct and carefully crafted statement of its values and priorities regarding children's protection. By setting forth rules and expectations for user behavior, these guidelines aim to construct TikTok's legitimacy as a responsible steward of children's online experiences while balancing commercial imperatives. Notably, TikTok refers to its under-18 users as 'youth' or 'young people' rather than 'children', the term recognized in international law (UN, 1989), perhaps to downplay the implications via language that softens the perceived vulnerability of its minor user base.

This article investigates the latent values and priorities embedded within TikTok's Community Guidelines¹ and their approach to child safety. Scholars have increasingly emphasized the significance of understanding how social media platforms construct and use values in their policy documents (Hallinan et al., 2022; Scharlach et al., 2023) and I enter this conversation by moving beyond the explicit promises of child protection to interrogate how the enforcement mechanisms and subtle normative frames presented in these policies support the unspoken values and strategic priorities underneath TikTok's approach. To do this, I conduct a mixed-methods analysis that combines computational lexical analysis to identify high-level linguistic patterns and qualitative discourse analysis to reveal the contextual meanings and tensions within the guidelines. Existing literature has scrutinized how users interpret policy documents (Quinn et al., 2019), policies' roles in the larger context of platform governance (Gorwa, 2019), and has even more recently offered comparisons of categories of values (Hallinan et al., 2022). However, I offer a novel perspective by focusing on latent rather than articulated values in a context with intense public pressure and regulatory scrutiny. I define latent values as the subtle, unspoken, and underlying principles that sit beneath and sometimes in contrast to articulated values, which are explicitly stated formalized principles and beliefs (Raz, 2001). By examining how TikTok's youth policies enact a complex balancing act between competing imperatives, this study contributes an analytical lens that goes beyond identifying individual governance practices to illuminate their cumulative and contextually specific effects. Considering policy texts as boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989), this study demonstrates how they function at the intersection of multiple stakeholders and competing interests. This approach reveals how these texts reflect and shape the broader sociotechnical landscape.

Platformization and platform ecologies

To contextualize governance documents appropriately, we need to zoom out from the user-facing side of the app and consider TikTok as a platform managed by ByteDance as a company and embedded within broader institutional and ideological ecologies (Gillespie, 2010; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Platform studies scholars describe how platforms mediate interactions among diverse stakeholders (Langlois and Elmer, 2013; van Dijck and Poell, 2013), including children who may lack sufficient cognitive and emotional maturity to navigate these complex systems (Livingstone and Third, 2017). As TikTok's user base is so skewed towards the young, its child-related policies have come under growing public scrutiny (Paul and Bhuiyan, 2023). To contextualize my analysis of how TikTok's Community Guidelines construct and govern children's participation, I draw on platform studies literature to examine TikTok through three key lenses: as a sociotechnical system, an ideological project, and a conditioning space.

Sociotechnical systems

As a sociotechnical system (Bijker, 1995), TikTok comprises an intricate web of human and non-human actors, from its algorithmic infrastructure and design features to its users, advertisers, content moderators, and the broader societal context. Components like these generally interact in opaque ways to shape user experiences on platforms (Bogost and Montfort, 2009). Complex recommendation systems and data collection practices often lack transparency (Pasquale, 2016), especially concerning children (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). In their work on the role of platforms and of algorithms, respectively, Gillespie (2010) and Beer (2017) both emphasize how increasing levels of technical sophistication obscure these technical elements' power. The opacity of TikTok's technical systems, which are themselves products of human design and internal decision-making, underscores the significance of its public-facing policies as a key site of mediation. These policies not only communicate the platform's values to external stakeholders but also serve to justify and obscure the complex social relations embedded within its technical architecture. I argue that this allows written policies to carry more power as they seek to summarize, simplify, and communicate the significance of the mostly inscrutable and socially mediated technical backend. Analyzing the latent assumptions and ideals encoded in these policies can thus shed light on how TikTok envisions and operationalizes its duty of care toward children, with implications for both the platform's governance strategies and children's online experiences.

Ideological projects

Like any company, platforms have specific economic and legal imperatives. Nieborg and Poell (2018) argue that for platforms, the logics (Andersson Schwarz, 2017) of these imperatives diffuse beyond their boundaries; ideological messaging and framing are one of the mechanisms for this diffusion. TikTok accomplishes this through marketing and product design, but the most overt place this happens is in written policies. As part of their broader ideological project, platforms make strategic technical choices and

claims to frame expectations, roles, and values for users (Chan et al., 2023; van Dijck, 2013) at the same time as they rhetorically position themselves via strategic language and metaphors (Gillespie, 2010; Kaye et al., 2021). TikTok deploys its policies and features to strategically frame its role in managing children's participation and shape its public image. By closely reading Community Guidelines as the most accessible and public-friendly version of their policies, I aim to uncover the latent values and priorities supported by this governance work.

Conditioning spaces

As a conditioning space, TikTok actively shapes the contours of children's expression and participation through its algorithmic filtering, interaction features, and incentive structures. The platform's distinctive affordances, such as its short-form video format and participatory duet and stitch tools, have given rise to novel youth cultures and creative practices (Kaye et al., 2021; Zulli and Zulli, 2022). At the same time, TikTok's opaque recommendation systems and gamified metrics can incentivize particular forms of self-presentation and sociality that may be developmentally inappropriate or psychologically taxing for young users, akin to the dynamics Marwick (2013) identified on earlier social media platforms. The Community Guidelines play a crucial role in defining the boundaries of acceptable conduct within this space. Examining how the guidelines define age-appropriate content and risky behaviors reveals the normative assumptions shaping children's experiences. This analysis can illuminate the tensions between TikTok's promise of creative empowerment for children and its underlying economic and legal imperatives as seemingly disparate but intertwined strands.

Platform governance

Platform governance is where these preceding concepts come together in practice (Gillespie, 2018; Gorwa, 2019). TikTok's policies balance the interests of their under-18 users with the relevant economic, regulatory, and geopolitical factors via strategic language. Platforms manage the elements within their sociotechnical system via a few tools that aim to accomplish their economic and cultural goals (which often overlap or reinforce one another) (Gillespie, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). The written tools that TikTok uses are Terms of Service, Privacy Policies, and Community Guidelines. Terms of Service are a legal agreement between user and service provider that lays out legal rights and responsibilities and Privacy Policies are generally concerned with data collection and usage. Both of these are famously inscrutable and have received popular media coverage that seeks to demystify or explain them to regular users. Community Guidelines offer a valuable lens for analyzing online sociality because they are written for a more public audience and define the ideal community experience, shaping how individuals should express themselves and interact. These guidelines are often where platforms articulate their approach to privacy, safety, and child protection. Beyond technical infrastructure, policy and content moderation are the main elements that social media platforms offer (Gillespie, 2018).

Platforms govern through hard and soft power (Gorwa, 2019), using explicit rules and technical constraints as well as rhetorical framing and nudges to shape norms and

behaviors (Bucher and Helmond, 2018; DeNardis and Hackl, 2015). TikTok deploys both: its Community Guidelines set forth extensive content prohibitions and account restrictions while also articulating aspirational values and behavioral ideals. This balance of hard rules and soft persuasion is evident in how the guidelines encourage ‘positive’ and ‘uplifting’ content while reserving the right to remove anything that does not fit this vision.

Scholars have argued that beneath their veneer of neutrality, platform policies fundamentally serve business imperatives by conditioning users to align their self-expression with commercial priorities (Duguay, 2023; Gillespie, 2018). TikTok’s (2024) child-centric rules are no exception: its restrictions on controversial content, emphasis on parental controls, and ‘age-appropriate’ activity boundaries work to construct the platform as a sanitized, brand-safe environment for child attention and engagement. At the same time, these policies discursively downplay the platform’s algorithmic designs that incentivize virality and maximize time-on-app – features that are inherently difficult to reconcile with child well-being concerns.

Analyzing the latent values and assumptions underlying TikTok’s child-related guidelines can thus shed important light on how the platform aims to strategically condition young people’s creative and social participation to align with its own commercial imperatives, even as it claims to prioritize their best interests. Given children’s developmental vulnerabilities and the opacity of TikTok’s algorithmic systems, close reading of its public-facing policy documents becomes essential for holding the platform accountable and empowering children, parents, and advocates to navigate its governance regime with clearer eyes. To understand the context and operation of these governance documents, we need a fuller understanding of TikTok’s sociocultural context that begins with its emergence and includes its current context, in which its governance is significantly shaped by localized political conditions (Zeng and Kaye, 2022).

Understanding TikTok’s emergence and development

In April 2014, Musical.ly launched as a mobile application with a large music library and basic editing features where users could create and share short lip-syncing videos. It soon reached 40 million daily active users and a valuation of \$500 million (Roof, 2016) but quickly found itself embroiled in controversies due to its failure to take basic actions to protect children. The company took no steps to actively rectify this situation (DOJ, 2019) and relied on outsourcing child safety via boilerplate recommendations to parents (musical.ly, 2016). This eventually led to a significant financial judgment against them by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2019) and a host of news stories documenting mental and physical health risks to (Notopoulos, 2018), as well as grooming and sexual exploitation of (KATU Staff, 2019), children on the app. TikTok launched in the United States in September 2017, its parent company ByteDance purchased Musical.ly two months later for \$1 billion (Mozur, 2017), and this new purchase was folded into TikTok in August 2018 (Russell, 2018)—including all data and user accounts. The purchase and merger did not erase this history or these risks.

Although TikTok’s own framing and even some academic work point to the social benefits of the app (Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Duguay, 2023; McLean et al., 2023), popular

media has identified many harms and risks. There is a broad media focus on mental health risks (Paul and Bhuiyan, 2023), passive and active exposure to inappropriate content (Kelly, 2022; Paul, 2021), and grooming or sexual exploitation (Burrows, 2019). These concerns are situated within bigger geopolitical battles between China, the US, and the EU – manifesting in debates about privacy and data access (Gordon, 2022).

TikTok and children

Considering TikTok as a platform from a sociotechnical perspective, the past is not dead—it is not even the past. As a result of its history, platform architecture, and economic incentives, TikTok has a complicated relationship with its younger users. Though the specific numbers depend on how users are measured, TikTok has seen an average of 15% year-over-year user growth (Statista, 2022) and reached 1 billion active users by 2021 (TikTok, 2021). It retains a heavily child-dominant user base, though older users have increased as a share of the user base over time (Gottfried, 2024). TikTok's immense popularity among children raises concerns about its potential impacts on their well-being.

A growing body of research has documented troubling associations between the platform's features (such as its algorithmically amplified trend culture, focus on visual self-presentation, and high engagement incentives) and issues like body image distortion, attention difficulties, exposure to mature content, and excessive use patterns among younger users (Kaye et al., 2021). Aside from this, research has also explored the implications of risky challenges (Kriegel et al., 2021) and the risks associated with body image and eating disorders (Pruccoli et al., 2022). These findings echo broader 'screen time' panics about social media's displacement of traditional developmental activities and sit alongside evidence about the adverse effects that social media platforms generally have on sleep, attention, learning, and privacy (Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016) as well as on mental health and self-esteem (Richards et al., 2015). At the same time, some studies have highlighted TikTok's potential to support children's creative expression, social connection, identity exploration, and civic participation (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023; Stahl and Literat, 2023). The platform's user-friendly video tools, participatory meme cultures, and interest-based communities can allow young people to express themselves, form relationships, and engage with social issues in developmentally important ways – contingent on strong guardrails for their safety and well-being.

This mix of risks and opportunities on TikTok has made the platform a lightning rod for public anxieties about children's digital media use. Popular media has frequently reported on these stories, in one case detailing a teen suicide that came after viewing self-harm content on TikTok (Paul and Bhuiyan, 2023), another describing concerning alcohol-related patterns on live streams (Lucas, 2023), and trend pieces such as one explaining how children as young as eight-years-old were being groomed (Burrows, 2019). These high-profile headlines and growing regulatory pressures have put TikTok's child safety approach under intense scrutiny, raising the stakes for its policy and public relations strategies.

TikTok thus finds itself walking a tightrope between fueling young people's enthusiastic adoption of the platform and shielding itself from charges of reckless indifference to

their welfare – a balancing act reflected in its policy documents. Platform policies are inherently consequential documents that attempt to satisfy users, guardians, government regulators, and corporate leaders' competing demands. They also struggle to keep up with the pace of changing technologies, practices, and norms and balance this against sometimes conflicting incentives to maximize user engagement and minimize legal risk. Because of this, critically examining TikTok's Community Guidelines can reveal important insights into how the platform aims to discursively position itself as a responsible steward of children's digital participation while advancing its commercial imperatives.

Research questions

Despite concerns, TikTok remains popular and continues growing. Its history as Musical.ly and ongoing child safety debates are intertwined with current governance challenges. This sociotechnical context is largely negotiated via platform policies, which serve as boundary objects that mediate between stakeholders' interests and values. In the following analysis, I turn to TikTok's Community guidelines as a key site where these competing imperatives are expressed and balanced through strategic language choices.

My analysis is oriented around two core research questions:

RQ1: What are the latent values and priorities encoded within TikTok's current Community Guidelines as they relate to children?

RQ2: How have these policies for children changed historically and what do these changes indicate about these latent values and priorities?

As we have seen, platforms are much more than user-facing apps. Analytically, they encompass everything from the technical backend, to the social dynamics involved in ongoing development, to the user and media understandings of the platform and its culture and practices (Gillespie, 2010). In the case of TikTok, features like automatic screen time limits and parental control dashboards represent overt efforts to address mounting public concerns over the platform's child safety risks (TikTok, 2023). However, the Community Guidelines remain a rich and under-examined text that offers a window into the deeper values and priorities driving TikTok's youth governance approach. By closely reading these policies to uncover what they say, what assumptions they rest on, and what implications they hold for children's experiences, this study contributes to platform studies scholarship on the discursive power of platform documents.

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining computational text analysis with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how TikTok's Community Guidelines discursively construct and govern children's participation on the platform. The primary aim is to uncover the latent values and priorities embedded in these policies and their implications for managing young users' experiences through an in-depth analysis of the guidelines' language, structure, and evolution over time. Central to my approach was a digital methods

sensibility (Rogers, 2013) that treats TikTok's policy documents as key artifacts for understanding the platform's youth governance logics. By triangulating (Denzin et al., 2023) computational and interpretive methods, this study offers an approach to uncovering the discursive politics of children's participation on TikTok.

Data sources, tools, and descriptive analysis

Guided by CDA's focus on the ideological work of institutional language (Fairclough, 2003), I conducted a three-phase analysis of six versions of TikTok's Community Guidelines, spanning from January 2020 to March 2023, collected via the Internet Archive. In the first, descriptive phase, I used computational text analysis techniques to identify high-level patterns and trends in the guidelines' content and language. This analysis was conducted in R using the *tidyverse* package for data manipulation along with *readtext* and *quanteda* for basic textual analysis (e.g., TF-IDF and n-grams) and lexical analysis (e.g., lexical complexity and diversity), *syuzhet* for AFINN sentiment analysis, and *stm* for structural topic modeling. These methods, drawn from computational social science (Lazer et al., 2009), provided a data-driven overview of the guidelines' dominant themes, linguistic features, and semantic shifts across different versions.

Comparative and critical analysis

The second, comparative phase involved a close reading of the guidelines' specific child-related provisions, tracing their evolution over time. Examining the changes in platform policies over time is crucial for understanding how companies adapt their governance strategies in response to shifting user practices, public concerns, and regulatory pressures (Gillespie, 2015; Gorwa, 2019). This platform vernacular analysis illuminated the distinctive strategies and framings TikTok employs in its approach to governing children's participation. The core of my analysis focused on TikTok's March 2023 guidelines, with the comparative analysis of earlier versions contextualizing and enriching the interpretation. This emphasis on the most recent iteration reflects both the feasibility constraints and the salience of this version in crystallizing TikTok's latest discursive strategies amidst intensifying regulatory pressures. A comprehensive clause-by-clause comparison of all six versions was beyond the scope of this analysis, but I acknowledge that the 'Scaffold, Segment, Silo' framework inductively generated from this 'snapshot' may capture techniques that emerged incrementally in prior versions.

In the final, critical phase, I drew on CDA principles to interrogate the latent values, assumptions, and tensions underpinning TikTok's child policies. Through multiple interpretive iterations, I developed a framework of three key governance strategies: scaffolding age-based restrictions, segmenting content categories, and siloing features. I argue that these strategies, and the latent values of positivity, proactivity, and precision they reflect, serve to construct an idealized vision of responsible platform stewardship while also subtly conditioning children's participation to align with TikTok's commercial imperatives and strategic goals. This approach was based on Kelle's (2007) adaptation of grounded theory, which builds out categories from repeated readings that inform a set of theoretical propositions.

Findings

This analysis revealed three key strategies—scaffolding, segmenting, and siloing—that TikTok uses to govern children’s participation, driven by underlying values of positivity, proactivity, and precision that serve TikTok’s strategic priorities. Through descriptive, comparative, and critical analysis, this project demonstrates the subtle ways TikTok’s policies balance competing imperatives of child protection, user engagement, and commercial interests. Social media platforms often converge on similar approaches to governance because policies are often the ‘scars’ that represent responses to controversies that inevitably emerge (Gillespie, 2018). However, this project contributes to platform studies scholarship through a novel analytic lens for interpreting governance documents that approaches latent values indirectly through a framework for understanding TikTok’s policies. This framework is itself a novel contribution to ongoing TikTok scholarship, providing a tool for researchers to explore how policy promises may translate into concrete user experiences amidst increasing regulatory scrutiny.

Structural and conceptual evolution

Compared to the previous five versions, TikTok’s March 2023 guidelines have profound changes in length, complexity, and sentiment polarity. As shown in Table 1, these newer guidelines are the longest, most readable, and most positive across any version; each of these metrics was trending in this direction, but this most recent version represents a significant acceleration. These changes reflect a more comprehensive and specific approach to delineating expectations and structures and an effort to do so in more accessible and friendly language. Drilling down by looking at sections that contain child-related keywords reinforces this trend; although these sections tend to be more negative given that they detail restrictions, sentiment analysis results (Table 2) for these child-related keywords indicate that the March 2023 guidelines represent the most positive version of these discussions in any version.

Along with these structural changes, topic modeling results indicate changing areas of conceptual focus over time. These results, detailed in Table 3 and visualized over time in Figure 1, suggest that while earlier versions tended to focus on

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for policy versions.

Document	Total Words	New Unique Words	Average Sentence Length	Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease	AFINN Sentiment Polarity
January 2020	3401	n/a	34.35	13.74	0.0017
August 2020	3440	27	35.83	12.26	0.0000
December 2020	5241	425	34.48	13.61	0.0068
February 2022	6410	261	29.81	16.84	0.0148
October 2022	6397	5	29.75	16.81	0.0146
March 2023	13,622	1176	29.04	21.69	0.0336

prohibitions against illegal or dangerous behavior and we see a topic concerning narrowly-defined child safety emerge in December 2020, the March 2023 guidelines are dominated by a topic concerning child protection more broadly. This five-topic model is supplemented by TF-IDF results shown in Table 4. These results compare these March 2023 guidelines against all preceding versions, revealing an overall focus on child-specific topics and an emphasis on detailed and specific language within child-specific subsections. Taken together, these descriptive lenses indicate that TikTok’s policy language is becoming more detailed and readable at the same time as it is increasingly focusing on child-specific issues.

Table 2. Average sentiment for context surrounding youth-related terms using keywords in context for versions of TikTok community guidelines.

Document	AFINN Sentiment Score
January 2020	-4.000
August 2020	-4.000
December 2020	-4.571
March 2022	-2.828
November 2022	-2.828
March 2023	-2.232

AFINN Sentiment Score: A measure of sentiment on a scale of -5 to +5, with negative values indicating negative sentiment and positive values indicating positive sentiment. This score is calculated for the context surrounding keywords related to young people.

Table 3. Structural topic modeling results.

Topic	Label	Explanation	Selected Terms
I	Community and Safety Guidelines	Focuses on content related to community guidelines, safety, and acceptable behavior. It includes rules on posting and promoting content.	<p>Highest Probability: content, sexual, depict, post, allow, promote, individual, community, include, activity, minor, user, behavior, harm, danger</p> <p>FREX: except, limit, post, and/or, user, depict, delinquent, mechanism, meant, praise, display, tolerate, individual, danger, safe</p> <p>High Lift: campaign, disinform, abject, activities, advantage, another, berate, challenges, cooperate, cope, delinquent, disseminate, format, get-rich-quick, gratify</p> <p>High Score: campaign, depict, delinquent, mechanism, tiktok, another, cope, disinform, excess, example, and/or, glorify, display, disparage, define</p>

(Continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Topic	Label	Explanation	Selected Terms
2	Youth and Minor Protection	Emphasizes guidelines for protecting youth and minors, especially regarding harm, bodily autonomy, and appropriateness, including the handling of personal data.	<p>Highest Probability: content, sexual, include, allow, inform, people, account, may, show, harm, body, use, person, tiktok, activity</p> <p>FREX: body, fyf, show, youth, ineligible, people, year, creator, older, perform, significant, moderate, want, live, enforce</p> <p>High Lift: year, get, older, youth, moderate, body, mature, treatment, want, creator, nude, ensure, show, business, trick</p> <p>High Score: year, fyf, ineligible, want, body, perform, older, youth, significant, creator, get, system, eligible, moderate, way</p>
3	Minor Protection and Privacy	Covers the protection of minors and privacy, focusing on content related to minors, personal data, and platform safety.	<p>Highest Probability: content, sexual, depict, minor, promote, include, share, activity, individual, platform, person, post, account, upload, stream</p> <p>FREX: minor, upload, depict, stream, glorify, normalize, share, another, will, define, solicit, data, crime, pii, disparage</p> <p>High Lift: advance, suspend, introduction, murder, mass, revictimize, close, team, upset, offline, pact, warrant, threshold, fan, abduct</p> <p>High Score: advance, depict, upload, stream, glorify, minor, suspend, pii, define, disparage, data, reveal, offline, permit, display</p>
4	Platform Use and Content Policies	Focuses on the use of the platform, content sharing policies, and enforcement of rules concerning content involving minors and sensitive information.	<p>Highest Probability: content, sexual, include, minor, depict, promote, platform, share, may, individual, activity, tiktok, account, person, user</p> <p>FREX: minor, upload, stream, recommend, depict, user, glorify, data, eligible, normalize, ineligible, extremist, feed, pii, imply</p> <p>High Lift: organ, accommodate, accord, age-appropriate, alarm, anti-lgbtq, aspect, blame, blatant, button, dispel, dissatisfaction, download, end, establish</p> <p>High Score: organ, depict, upload, stream, glorify, recommend, minor, ineligible, eligible, pii, data, fyf, define, disparage, system</p>

(Continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Topic	Label	Explanation	Selected Terms
5	Community Health and Misconduct	Addresses community health and misconduct, including behavior guidelines, promotion of safe practices, and prohibition of harmful activities.	<p>Highest Probability: content, sexual, include, allow, promote, activity, community, account, harm, behavior, platform, individual, use, tiktok, abuse</p> <p>FREX: content, allow, community, behavior, danger, organization, promote, sexual, suicide, violence, cause, also, individual, activity, commit</p> <p>High Lift: creation, intellectual, child, necessary, underage, conversation, foundation, private, purpose, pornography, coordinate, raise, artist, safe, power</p> <p>High Score: creation, content, stream, sexual, upload, allow, post, individual, promote, community, behavior, activity, organization, carry, danger</p>

Highest Probability: Terms with the highest probability of appearing in a topic.

FREX: Terms that are both frequent and exclusive to a topic.

High Lift: Terms that appear more often in a topic compared to others.

High Score: Terms with the highest overall relevance to a topic.

fyf: for you feed; *pii:* personally identifying information.

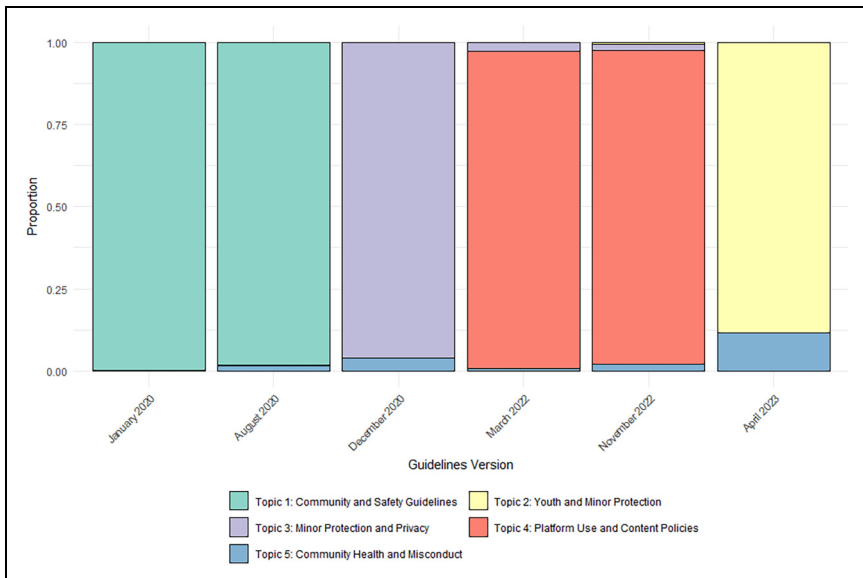


Figure 1. STM topic distribution by guidelines version.

Table 4. Key terms in march 2023 community guidelines. TF-IDF results measuring a term’s prevalence in a document relative to its prevalence across all documents.

Key Terms from March 2023 Guidelines		Key Terms from Child-Related Subset of March 2023 Guidelines	
Term	TF-IDF Score	Term	TF-IDF Score
Young	0.011532	Exposure	0.018535
Exposure	0.005653	People	0.012349
Learn	0.005427	Learn	0.011327
Showing	0.004286	Moderate	0.007208
fyf	0.003761	fyf	0.006772
Rules	0.003392	Human	0.006374
Age-restricted	0.002940	Youth	0.005593
Moderate	0.002940	Animals	0.005149
Performances	0.002940	Dedicated	0.005149
March	0.002713	News	0.005149

fyf: for you feed.

Scaffold, segment, and silo: A broad view of TikTok’s approach

Building on the quantitative trends identified in the descriptive analysis, a close comparative reading of TikTok’s (2024) Community Guidelines reveals a novel framework for governing children’s participation that I term ‘Scaffold, Segment, and Silo.’ This tripartite approach strategically balances the platform’s competing imperatives of enabling expression, ensuring safety, and maximizing engagement through a system of calibrated restrictions, content categorization, and partitioned access. To supplement the following descriptions, Table 5 includes selected examples for each piece of this framework and Appendix 1 provides policy snippets that illustrate how these three tactics operate in a fuller context.

Scaffolding. Central to TikTok’s youth governance model is a system of layered tiers of increasing content restrictions based on the age of users and the perceived risk level of content. I conceptualize this as ‘scaffolding’ because it represents a gradual, supportive structure, much like in construction, where TikTok builds up layers of content restrictions. Each tier in this scaffolding adds a level of protection, akin to how physical scaffolding supports and protects. Specifically, this entails escalating prohibitions and limitations based on the severity and illegality of content, rather than uniform blocking of potentially inappropriate material. The platform imposes the strictest prohibitions on unequivocally illegal and harmful material, such as child exploitation imagery and credible threats of violence. However, TikTok employs a more nuanced approach for content that is lawful but potentially inappropriate for children, exemplified in its policy on ‘Dangerous activities and challenges’. Here, the guidelines differentiate between ‘significant’ and ‘moderate’ physical harm, completely banning the former while applying tailored visibility restrictions to the latter. This scaffolded

Table 5. Representative excerpts for scaffold, segment and silo strategies.

Text	Explanation
Scaffold	
'We do not allow content that may put young people at risk of exploitation, or psychological, physical, or developmental harm. This includes child sexual abuse material (CSAM), youth abuse, bullying, dangerous activities and challenges, exposure to overtly mature themes, and consumption of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, or regulated substances.'	This example shows scaffolding by prohibiting a range of content that could harm young people, with the level of restriction escalating based on the severity and nature of the potential harm.
Content showing cosmetic surgery without risk warnings is age-restricted to users 18 and older.	This illustrates scaffolding by applying age restrictions to specific content (cosmetic surgery without risk warnings) to shield younger users from potentially harmful or developmentally inappropriate material.
Segment	
'We do not allow sexual exploitation or gender-based violence, including non-consensual sexual acts, image-based sexual abuse, sextortion, physical abuse, and sexual harassment.'	This demonstrates segmentation by breaking down the broad category of sexual exploitation and gender-based violence into specific policy subcategories, each with its own set of prohibitions.
Shocking and graphic content is segmented based on the level of violence and potential for harm, with different rules applied to fictional violence, real-world graphic violence, and content in the public interest.	This shows segmentation within the shocking and graphic content policy domain, with differentiated enforcement based on the specific nature and context of the content.
Silo	
'You must be 16 years and older to use direct messages.'	This illustrates siloing by completely restricting access to the direct messaging feature for users under 16, creating a separate, age-gated communication space within the app.
Content depicting seductive performances, sexualized posing, or allusions to sexual activity by adults is age-restricted and ineligible for the For You feed (FYF).	This demonstrates siloing by isolating sexually suggestive content from both younger users (through age restriction) and the main content discovery mechanism (the FYF), effectively partitioning it within the platform.

system allows TikTok to mitigate risks to children while still preserving space for creative expression, albeit within carefully delimited boundaries. This system also provides legal justification that content removal is narrowly tailored to substantial threats, a defense that blanket speech restrictions likely could not withstand. Thus,

TikTok has constructed an architectural framework enabling it to prohibit dangerous illegality, discourage risk by limiting reach in gray areas, and foster creative expression under policy guardrails.

Segmenting. TikTok parses its massive corpus of content into differentiated buckets with tailored moderation policies based on format, topics, and risks. I describe this approach as ‘segmenting’ because it involves dividing content into distinct categories or ‘segments,’ each governed by tailored policies. This segmentation allows for more precise and appropriate application of these rules, as content is not treated homogeneously but is instead managed according to its unique characteristics and specific context. TikTok’s guidelines break down the vast array of user-generated videos, comments, and interactions into discrete policy domains like ‘Youth Safety’, ‘Violent Extremism’, and ‘Integrity and Authenticity’. Within each segment, the platform further differentiates based on the specific nature and context of the content. For instance, depictions of fictional violence may be permitted with appropriate warnings, while real-world graphic violence is strictly prohibited. Beyond format and topics, rules also segment based on intent and objectives. Misinformation is segmented by the potential for harm, with medical falsehoods more restricted than gossip about celebrities. ‘Spam’ is segmented into bulk operations, automation, and directing traffic off-platform. This framework allows highly customized moderation for each content slice depending on attributes like age groups, topics, formats, and motives. By parsing content into granular segments, TikTok can apply fine-tuned moderation at scale, going beyond one-size-fits-all approaches while maintaining consistency and legibility.

Siloing. Finally, TikTok restricts inappropriate yet lawful content from children through isolation rather than outright removal. I describe this as ‘siloing’ because it involves isolating certain content and features in a separate and contained manner, similar to storing grain in a silo. In the context of TikTok, this means creating distinct, enclosed spaces within the platform where certain content and features are accessible only to appropriate age groups. The platform completely cordons off adult-oriented and high-risk functionalities like livestreaming and direct messaging from younger users while also algorithmically filtering their feeds to limit exposure to mature themes. This partitioning creates separate spheres of participation within the app, allowing adults more latitude for self-expression while shielding children from developmentally inappropriate interactions. Beyond features, certain content also faces siloing from underage viewers. Sexually suggestive performances, allusions to sexual activity, and alcohol and drug consumption remain permitted for adults, but visibility is reduced to protect adolescents. TikTok leverages data like screen time use and content clusters viewed to algorithmically limit potentially inappropriate exposure based on age. Even teen commenting and sharing abilities are progressively siloed, with tighter restrictions on younger versus older children. TikTok’s siloing reflects a recognition of children’s unique vulnerabilities and needs on social media and an attempt to create transitional buffers.

From guidelines to latent values and priorities. Crucially, these three strategies work in concert, forming a multi-layered system of checks and balances. The scaffolded tiers of restrictions set the outer limits of what is permissible, while the segmented content categories enable more targeted and contextual rule enforcement within those bounds. The siloed participation spaces, in turn, provide an additional safeguard by proactively isolating children from predictable risks, rather than relying solely on reactive moderation. This interlocking approach provides a form of defense-in-depth, anticipating potential policy gaps and failure points.

At the same time, the ‘Scaffold, Segment, Silo’ model reflects the inherent tensions in TikTok’s competing mandates as a commercial platform. On one hand, the graduated and segmented restrictions, along with the age-based silos, demonstrate a commitment to erecting guardrails around children’s participation and well-being. Yet, these same techniques also work to maintain a sanitized and frictionless environment for engagement and advertising, carefully pruning away controversial content and walling off ‘brand unsafe’ behaviors. The plasticity of the guidelines leaves ample room for discretionary enforcement in service of TikTok’s bottom line.

Turning to latent values: Positivity, proactivity, and precision

Underlying this framework’s approach to youth governance is a set of latent values that work to align the platform’s child protection efforts with its broader strategic priorities. Through close analysis of the guidelines’ language, framing, and contextual clues, I identify three fundamental value orientations—positivity, proactivity, and precision—that infuse TikTok’s policy regime and shape its public-facing performance of corporate responsibility.

Latent values. TikTok’s guidelines are filled with an ethos of aspirational positivity, painting the platform as a joyful space for creativity, connection, and self-expression. From the introductory emphasis on ‘bringing people together’ and ‘building a positive community’, to the principle of ‘be kind and treat others the way you would want to be treated’ (TikTok, 2024), the document projects a rosy vision of harmonious platformed sociality. This relentless focus on the upbeat and uplifting is more than just tone-setting—it serves a strategic purpose in shaping perceptions and expectations of the platform. By foregrounding TikTok’s supposed capacity to ‘inspire’, ‘encourage’, and ‘empower’ users, particularly children, the guidelines deflect attention from the thornier realities of behavioral manipulation, data extraction, and content moderation that undergird the platform’s commercial model. The positivity imperative also constructs an idealized user subjectivity, defined by wholesome, pro-social, and brand-safe forms of engagement and self-expression. The documents are filled with positive expressions of ideals, aims, and values rather than neutral policy language.

Closely intertwined with this constructed positivity is a pervasive rhetoric of proactive safety and responsibility throughout the guidelines. The initial framing of the document begins with four guiding pillars; one of these is based around user empowerment, but the writing makes it clear that the guidelines ‘apply to everyone and everything on our

platform’ and are intended to protect a positive user experience. This framing positions TikTok not as a primarily profit-seeking enterprise but as a community needing collaborative stewardship. The guidelines go on to detail a range of proactive measures such as ‘age-appropriate privacy and safety settings’, ‘content maturity scores’, and automated filtering of ‘potentially problematic’ videos (TikTok, 2024). By emphasizing its preemptive and technologically sophisticated approach to risk mitigation, TikTok seeks to reassure anxious parents, regulators, and advertisers of its capacity and commitment to shielding children from harm. However, this proactivity imperative also justifies a massive apparatus of surveillance, behavioral analysis, and automated intervention, all operating to optimize the platform’s balance of safety and engagement for maximum retention and impression capture.

The value of precision manifests in the guidelines’ exhaustive enumeration of content categories, rule variations, and exception clauses, projecting a sense of technical mastery and control. The child-related provisions showcase an intricate latticework of age-based restrictions, content taxonomies, and situational distinctions. For instance, depictions of alcohol consumption are prohibited for users under 21, with escalating tiers of visibility reduction and detail limitations for older teens and young adults (TikTok, 2024). This hair-splitting precision serves multiple strategic purposes beyond just clarifying the rules for users. It provides a pseudo-legal justification for content moderation and user discipline, deflecting charges of arbitrary censorship. It rationalizes an expansive automated and human surveillance system to enforce these complex distinctions at scale. It also enacts a performed authority over the challenging grey areas of child safety and well-being, turning messy moral judgments into quantified checkboxes and thresholds. TikTok’s level of specificity is a piece of how the company attempts to explain the rigor of its proactive approach and a rationale for how it argues that the platform can be a positive force for children.

Latent priorities. These three value orientations—positivity, proactivity, and precision—work together to advance TikTok’s interlocking strategic priorities. The positivity imperative sets the discursive stage, shaping perceptions of the platform as a force for good and mollifying critics with a veneer of social responsibility. The proactivity imperative justifies an expansive infrastructure of preemptive surveillance and intervention, promising to nip safety threats in the bud while amassing behavioral data for more granular ad targeting. Finally, the precision imperative provides a technocratic cover of expertise, ostensibly insulating the platform’s judgment calls on acceptable content and age-appropriate interactions from external scrutiny. These values construct a public-facing ethic of care that aligns with the platform’s fundamental business interests—maximizing user engagement, minimizing legal liability, and optimizing market perception. A diagram detailing the relationship between the governance framework and latent values and priorities can be seen in Figure 2.

While these encoded values project a benevolent commitment to child well-being, they also work to circumscribe the platform participation of young people in profound ways. The positivity imperative encourages a narrowly prescribed form of upbeat and inoffensive self-expression, while the proactivity imperative subjects every post, comment, and interaction to preemptive vetting and potential censorship. The precision

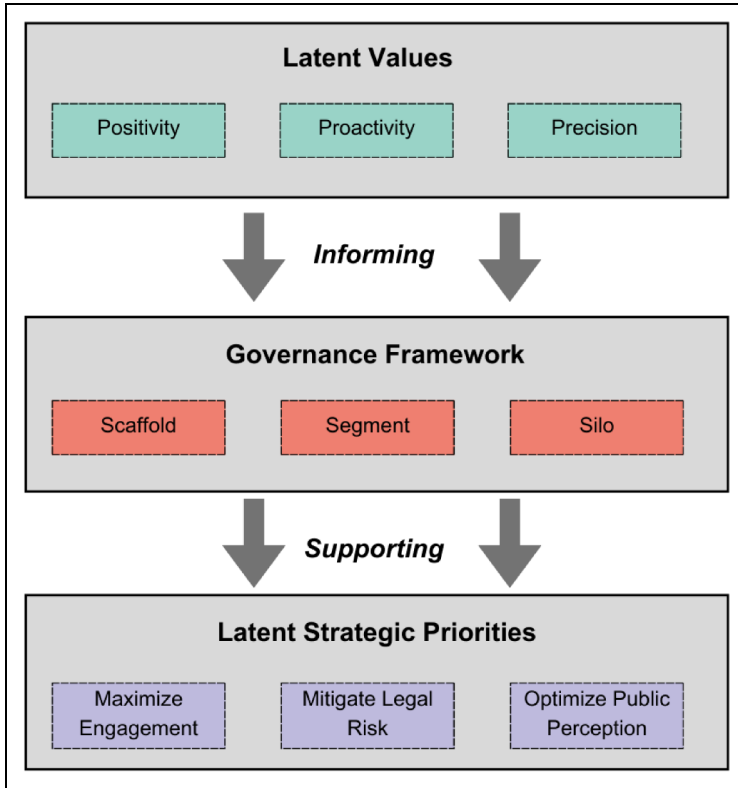


Figure 2. Tiktok's youth governance framework.

imperative splinters user experiences and social imaginaries along algorithmically inferred age boundaries, confining children to a digital playpen of truncated creative possibilities. Far from fostering an empowered community of young digital citizens, these values operate to meticulously groom children's attention and behavioral data into a sanitized and standardized input stream for TikTok's predictive personalization and optimized social routing.

In many ways, TikTok's deployment of positivity, proactivity, and precision reflects broader trends in the evolving platform governance of children's participation. Commercial social media's 'surveillance capitalism' model hinges on the intensive monitoring and modulation of user behavior, affect, and identity (Vaidhyanathan, 2021; Zuboff, 2019). The discursive emphasis on child safety and empowerment provides a socially palatable cover for the level of invasive data collection (Huddleston, 2022; Katersky, 2023; Touma, 2022) that TikTok is known for. However, TikTok's specific constellation of values and tactics also speaks to the unique tensions of its position as a Chinese-owned platform operating at a massive scale across culturally heterogeneous and politically polarized global contexts. Its trifecta of upbeat messaging, proactive policing, and dizzying rule precision works to navigate this treacherous terrain by

assuaging Western fears, deflecting regulatory pressures, and projecting a sense of algorithmic omniscience.

With this said, these strategic maneuvers also encode significant frictions and slippages. The positivity imperative collides with the proactivity and precision imperatives' need to name and taxonomize the threats to be neutralized. The siloed experiences promised by the precision imperative undercut the joy and solidarity of the positivity imperative. The proactivity imperative's logic of preemption sits uneasily with the positivity imperative's rhetoric of openness and agency. While deftly navigated in the guidelines' discursive register, these tensions point to deeper ethical quandaries around the platform's mediating role in young people's social worlds and identity formation. Although most users only read these guidelines or think about them if they run against a rule, they institute a way of being in the Bourdieusian sense (1993); they create and maintain conditions that strategically position user experiences and cultural conversations toward favorable ends for TikTok.

Scripting childhood engagement: The influence of latent values

TikTok's 'Scaffold, Segment, Silo' approach to youth governance, driven by values of positivity, proactivity, and precision, shapes children's participation through policy 'scripts' (Akrich and Latour, 1992) that configure young users' perceptions, behaviors, and development in alignment with commercial imperatives.

The proactivity imperative's preemptive constraints on young people's access to certain features and interactions, while framed as protective measures, can limit their agency and creativity. The precision imperative's microtargeted age-based content restrictions, presented as 'age-appropriate' safeguards, may attune children to internalize platform-sanctioned norms of maturity and self-expression. This scripted precision manifests through platform culture, such as the emergence of creators specializing in explaining TikTok's policies, features, and algorithmic mysteries in intricate detail.

Finally, the positivity imperative's relentless emphasis on upbeat, sanitized engagement, though promising empowerment and authenticity, may mask the deeper logics of behavioral manipulation and data extraction that fuel the attention economy (Davenport and Beck, 2002) within TikTok. This scripted positivity drives phenomena like lighthearted or humorous viral challenges, memes, and performances that encourage children's engagement through positive affirmation and peer validation. While these dynamics may provide social and emotional benefits for children, like fostering a sense of belonging (Phua et al., 2017), they also make entertaining connections dependent on continual platform engagement.

These scripting dynamics raise critical questions about the developmental implications of growing up on TikTok. While the platform offers opportunities for creativity, connection, and self-expression (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022), the potential for TikTok to condition young people's imaginative horizons, social repertoires, and identity formation to the platform's profit-driven rhythms and rules raises concerns. These concerns include the potential erosion of children's capacities for autonomous self-determination and authentic self-expression (Vaidhyanathan, 2021) and the undermining of resilience and

resourcefulness needed to navigate an increasingly complex platformed landscape (Livingstone and Third, 2017).

Moreover, TikTok's discursive performance of child protection conceals the structural inequalities and vulnerabilities its sociotechnical architecture perpetuates. The differential exposure to risks and opportunities coded into the platform's age-based access tiers and content taxonomies threatens to reproduce and intensify offline disparities along lines of age, race, gender, and class (Duguay, 2023). The veneer of inclusivity projected by the positivity imperative can conceal the uneven distribution of privacy, safety, and support across TikTok's user base, potentially leaving marginalized children more vulnerable to the platform's surveillant gaze and disciplinary mechanisms.

Uncovering these hidden politics of youth datafication and platformization is vital for both scholarly analysis and public advocacy. This study contributes to platform studies scholarship by illuminating the subtle ways that policy documents performatively construct youth subjectivities and social imaginaries in service of their economic and political interests. It extends this literature's concern with the discursive power of platforms (Gillespie, 2010) by demonstrating the need for greater attention to the specific conditions of youth participation in an increasingly platformed media ecosystem.

At the same time, this analysis offers a cautionary tale for policymakers, parents, and educators grappling with the ethical challenges of children's digital futures. By revealing the tensions and slippages between TikTok's rhetorical projections and practical enactments of child empowerment, it underscores the limitations of a self-regulatory paradigm that leaves the formative conditions of children's online engagement to the discretion of profit-seeking platforms. As TikTok cements its status as a pivotal intermediary of youth culture and socialization, it is imperative to question whether its behavior-shaping logics and interest-serving policies align with children's authentic well-being and flourishing. There is an extensive literature base exploring these questions (Barassi, 2020; Davisson and Alati, 2024; Livingstone, 2020) and I offer this framework and analytic approach as a tool to advance TikTok scholarship that may explore the practical realities of platform governance for children through different methodological approaches that center users or content rather than policy.

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1. I analyze the English version of these Global guidelines. TikTok localizes these guidelines regionally via internal moderation criteria (TikTok, 2024).

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Author biography

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Appendix I: Selections from TikTok's Community Guidelines

To illustrate the three approaches within TikTok's governance framework, I present an example of each in fuller context below to supplement the analysis found in the paper. Each of these examples is taken directly from TikTok's (2023) most recent Community Guidelines.

Scaffold: in this excerpt, we see scaffolding demonstrated as TikTok does three things: defines distinct risk/harm levels, customizes restrictions accordingly (from prohibited to limited reach to allowed), and contextualizes based on severity and intent

Dangerous activities and challenges include dares, games, tricks, and other acts performed by non-professionals that carry inherent or known risks and which may result in significant physical harm.

Significant physical harm typically requires professional medical treatment and creates a risk of temporary or permanent disability or disfigurement. This includes dislocated or broken bones, poisoning, loss of consciousness, serious burns, electrocution, concussion, and choking.

Moderate physical harm is unlikely to require professional medical treatment and does not create a risk of disability or disfigurement. This includes small cuts with minimal blood loss and minor bruising on the body.

NOT allowed

- Showing dangerous activities that involve visible or imminent significant physical harm, or promoting dangerous activities
- Showing or promoting the inappropriate use of dangerous tools, such as knives, axes, chainsaws, and welding torches
- Showing or promoting the eating or drinking of substances that are dangerous for humans to consume, such as rocks and detergent
- Showing or promoting dangerous driving behavior, such as exceeding the speed limit, running a red light, and distracted driving (including posing for a picture and live streaming while driving)

Age-restricted (18 years and older)

- Showing activities that are likely to be imitated and may lead to any physical harm FYF ineligible
- Showing activities that involve visible or imminent moderate physical harm, or promoting activities that are likely to lead to moderate physical harm
- Showing extreme sports or stunts performed by professionals in public spaces, such as jumps and tricks in skateboarding and freestyle bicycle motocross (BMX)

Allowed

- Using weapons, such as spears and shields, in ceremonial settings, religious festivals, and cultural performances
-

Segment: in this excerpt, we see segmenting demonstrated within TikTok's 'Safety and Civility' section of the guidelines. In this section, they first lay out an overall principle before breaking out categories of related behaviors under this umbrella with their own scaffolded rules within.

Safety and Civility

Physical and psychological safety form the foundation of individual well-being, and civility is the key to a thriving community. Being civil does not mean people must always agree, but

rather it is about recognizing everyone's inherent dignity and being respectful in action, words, and tone when engaging others.

Violent Behaviors and Criminal Activities

We are committed to bringing people together in a way that does not lead to physical conflict. We recognize that online content related to violence can cause real-world harm. We do not allow any violent threats, incitement to violence, or promotion of criminal activities that may harm people, animals, or property. If there is a specific, credible, and imminent threat to human life or serious physical injury, we report it to relevant law enforcement authorities.

Youth Exploitation and Abuse

TikTok is a place for exploration and learning. Allowing young people to do so safely during their unique phase of development is our priority. We do not allow youth exploitation and abuse, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM), nudity, grooming, sextortion, solicitation, pedophilia, and physical or psychological abuse of young people. This includes content that is real, fictional, digitally created, and shown in fine art or objects.

Sexual Exploitation and Gender-Based Violence

We are committed to providing a space that embraces gender equity, supports healthy relationships, and respects intimate privacy. Undermining these values can cause trauma and may lead to physical and psychological harm. We do not allow sexual exploitation or gender-based violence, including non-consensual sexual acts, image-based sexual abuse, sextortion, physical abuse, and sexual harassment.

Human Exploitation

We are committed to upholding individual human dignity and ensuring our platform is not used to take advantage of vulnerable people. We do not allow human exploitation, including trafficking and smuggling. We understand how important it is for survivors of human exploitation to share their stories, and for migrants and refugees to be able to document their journeys, so we provide a space to do so.

Harassment and Bullying

We welcome the respectful expression of different viewpoints but not toxicity or trolling. We want to ensure that anyone can share their voice without the fear of being degraded or bullied. We do not allow language or behavior that harasses, humiliates, threatens, or doxxes anyone. This also includes responding to such acts with retaliatory harassment (but excludes non-harassing counter speech).

Silo: in this excerpt, we see three examples of TikTok silos certain features and tools away from groups of users based on their age and implied maturity level.

Comments and Direct Messages

Comments and direct messages on TikTok allow our users to interact with videos or directly with others, and provide an integral interactive experience to the platform. You must be 16 years and older to use direct messages.

Our guidelines listed above also apply to comments and messages. A violation of our rules will result in the removal of the content or a restriction on sending direct messages, and may lead to an account ban.

TikTok LIVE

TikTok LIVE allows our community to interact in real-time. To bolster a safe experience on LIVE, we have a higher minimum age threshold for this feature. You must be 18 years and older to go LIVE, and to send gifts to a creator during a LIVE session.

Our guidelines listed above also apply to going LIVE. A violation of our rules will result in closing an ongoing LIVE session, and may lead to restrictions on using LIVE or an account ban.

Repeatedly livestreaming content that is ineligible for the FYF may result in your account not being eligible for the FYF or being harder to find in search.

Monetization

We offer tools that let creators monetize their content, and that give businesses the ability to operate and expand their enterprise. You must be 18 years and older to use monetization features.

Accounts must satisfy the relevant entry criteria to be eligible for our monetization features. A violation of our rules may result in a temporary restriction of monetization features, and repeated violations will lead to a permanent restriction or an account ban. Content that is not eligible in the FYF may be restricted from monetization features.
